

The Specialist vs. Corporal: All E-4s Are Not the Same

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The Specialist vs. Corporal:
All E-4s Are Not the Same
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"Liberty is sounded for all NCOs [non-commissioned officers] and hashed marked PFCs [private first class E-2]." The first edition of the Handbook for Marine NCOs uses this quote to illustrate the importance of the hash mark as a sign of seniority and experience.¹ The quote has been banished to the lore of *the old Corps* as Marines are promoted much quicker today and the importance and prestige of the hash mark has diminished over time. The promotion rates for junior Marines is much quicker today than it was when hash marks were the coveted symbol of a *salty* non-NCO. As late as the early 1990s though, it was still not uncommon to see a Lance Corporal, E-3, wearing a hash mark symbolizing at least four years of service. Today with quicker promotions, a Lance Corporal with a hash mark is considered to be a "less than a stellar" Marine or a troubled young Marine who was not promoted with his peers. Many Marines today are promoted to Sergeant, E-5, before reaching the four years time in service. Currently the minimum time in grade for a lance corporal to be eligible for promotion to corporal, E-4, is only eight- months.² To preserve the prestige of the NCO ranks, the Marine Corps needs to adopt a rank structure similar to the Army model which reflects two separate grades for E-4, one for the current grade of corporal and another that is a non-NCO.

The Backbone of the Corps

The Marine NCO has long been considered the backbone of the Corps. General Robert H. Barrow USMC (Ret), Commandant Marine Corps from 1979-1983, states, "The Marine noncommissioned officer represents the first link in the chain of leadership which is the hallmark of our Corps...it is paramount that you [the noncommissioned officers] know your job, that you are able to instruct, guild, and direct those in your charge."³ Today in Iraq, Marine NCOs and particularly the "strategic corporals" are leading small units and making important life and death decisions that can often have strategic level consequences. There are many examples of young corporals who are mature enough and experienced enough to meet the challenges and responsibilities that are inherent to the rank of corporal. One can read reports almost weekly of Marines awarded for valor in Iraq. To date, over 6900 combat medals have been awarded to Marines for combat operations in Iraq, many of whom are corporals.⁴ The responsibility of being an NCO today is as great, if not greater, than at any other time in Marine Corps history. Unfortunately, for every positive report of a young corporal living up to the expectation of his rank, there are daily reports of young corporals who

fail to meet the expectation of their grade. Many corporals fail to uphold the prestige of their rank because they are simply not ready to be NCOs.

The Inexperienced, The Administrators and The Technicians

Like all leaders of Marines, a corporal is expected to set the highest example for his Marines to follow. He is expected to be a mentor, a counselor, and a facilitator to his Marines. Yet, many corporals lack the experience or the desire necessary to carry out these tasks. Other may simply not be ready to be NCOs. The lack of leadership skills that some corporals display is not always solely their fault. Some fall victim to a system that promotes them to corporal too quickly. Leadership and experience take time to cultivate and often Marines are placed in leadership billets before they are ready for the responsibility that accompanies it. These young Marines are still learning and refining the basic skills required of a non-NCO when they are promoted to corporal. Many Marines who are promoted to corporal still have difficulty taking care of their own personal and military matters and yet, by virtue of their rank, they are expected to mentor and counsel junior Marines effectively.

The lack of leadership can also be caused by the nature of the billet a Marine holds. Often a Marine is denied the opportunity to develop the leadership skills necessary to effectively lead Marines. This can happen because the nature some jobs do not allow cultivation of leadership skills. Many corporals work in small shops performing administrative or technical duties which do not require them to exercise leadership of subordinates. Often they perform the same jobs as the non-NCOs in their shops. When this happens, there is often little distinction between the lance corporal, a non-NCO, and the corporal. One can not expect the corporal to properly mentor the lance corporal anymore than one might expect a lance corporal to mentor a private first class. Many Marines are ranked as NCOs but they perform duties more closely resembling that of an Army specialist.

The Specialist

The Army currently uses two ranks for E-4, the corporal and the specialist. The difference between the two ranks is that while a corporal is considered an NCO, a specialist is not. The Army specialist evolved from the technician ranks that both the Army and Marine Corps used prior to World War I. There were very few changes to the

enlisted rank structures prior to the war. The services were able to effectively function with only the ranks of first sergeant, sergeant, corporal, and private. There was little need for technically trained personnel as the military occupational specialties mainly consisted of only infantry, artillery, engineers, quartermasters and musicians. Promotion rates were slow and many enlisted men were never promoted beyond the rank of sergeant.⁵ The percentage of NCOs in the Marine Corps prior to World War I was only between 13 and 18.8% of the total force.⁶ The system was changed with the advent of new technologies that were developed during the war. Skilled men were needed to maintain and operate vehicles, tanks, aircraft, and new weapons systems. As a result, the percentage of NCOs in the Marine Corps increased to 27% by 1937 and by 1958, the total number of NCOs in the Marine Corps had reached 58%.⁷ Many corporals were promoted to sergeant but were required to continue working in same billet they had held as corporals.⁸ This is the same problem the Marine Corps has today with non-NCOs and corporals performing the same jobs.

The problem was not Marine specific; the Army was facing similar problems after World War I with the rank structure. The solution both services adopted was similar. Both services created rank structures that had ranks for

technicians. These rank structures were overly complicated and contained too many different ranks. Further compounding the problem, the ranks of technicians were still considered NCOs and the number of NCOs in the force structure remained too high. To alleviate the problems, the Army and Marine Corps change their rank structures during the 1950s. In 1958, the Marine Corps did away with the technical ranks and adopted the rank structure that is currently in use today.⁹ The Army changed their rank structure in 1955 by creating the specialist rank which is an E-4 but not considered an NCO.¹⁰

Conclusion

Today the percentage of NCOs in the Marine Corps is proportionally balanced, but there is still a problem with the rank of corporal. The prestige of the NCO ranks is in jeopardy as many corporals today are being promoted too quickly and lack the leadership skills required for their rank. Although many corporals performing duties in administrative or technical billets are very proficient in their billets, they are more like the Army specialists than the Marine NCOs. Many have not acquired the skills necessary to lead Marines as NCOs and many will not until they reach the rank sergeant. Conversely, some corporals,

particularly those in the combat arms military occupations, are given the opportunity to develop their leadership skills much earlier. There is often a distinct difference in the level of leadership developed and displayed by corporals in technical fields and those in the combat arms fields. To preserve the prestige of the rank of corporal, and for young Marines who lack leadership experience or who perform duties that are administrative or technical nature, the rank of specialist is a well suited alternative to the rank of corporal.

Notes

¹ Col Robert Debs Heinl Jr. USMC., *Handbook for Marine NCOs* Annapolis: Naval institute Press, 1979 Handbook for Marine NCOs 1979.

² Marine Corps Personnel Management Division
<https://lnweb1.manpower.usmc.mil/manpower/mi/mra_ofct.nsf/m&ra+home

³ Heinl, ix

⁴ Marine Corps Personnel Management Division, Awards page
<https://lnweb1.manpower.usmc.mil/manpower/mi/mra_ofct.nsf/m&ra+home

⁵ Bernard C. Nalty, et al *The United States Marine Corps Ranks and Grades 1775-1969* Marine Corps Historical Reference Pamphlet, 1970

⁶. Dick Gaines GySgt USMC Ret "History of the USMC Rank Structure" <www.angelfire.com/ca/dickg/gunny.html

⁷ Gaines

⁸ Gaines

⁹ Nalty, 40

¹⁰ US Army Center of Military History
<http://www.army.mil/cmh/>

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